The Story of Marie Pontonnier

Adapted from "Before the King's Daughters: The Filles à Marier, 1634-1662" by Peter J. Gagné

Marie Pontonnier *daughter of Urbain Pontonnier and Felicité Jamin* was baptized 22 January 1643 in the parish of Saint-Vincent at Le Lude (arrondissement of La Flèche, diocese of Angers), Anjou. She is related to **Jean Valiquet**, who married ***fille a marier*** **Renée Loppé**. After the death of her father, Marie (age 13) came to Nouveau France in 1656.

On 6 May 1657, ***notary Saint-Père*** drew up a marriage contract between Marie and **Pierre Gadois *fils*** *son of merchant Pierre Gadois and Louise Mauger* (*who were married at St-Martin d'Ige about 1627*): **Pierre Gadois *père*** was buried on 20 October 1667 at Montréal—and **Louise Mauger** was buried at Montréal on 18 March 1690. ***Barbé de Boulogne***, ***Jeanne Mance*** and ***Major Lambert Closse*** were among the witnesses to the contract. Marie and Pierre were married at Montréal on 12 October 1657 by **Père Claude Pijart**—a ***master armorer and gunsmith***. Pierre was baptized on 17 November 1631 in the parish of Saint-Martin in Igé (arrondissement of Mortagne, diocese of Sees), Perche.

Pierre and his sister ***Roberté Gadois*** came to Nouveau France in 1636 with their parents, who were recruited by **Robert Giffard**. After a stay in the Québec City region, Pierre moved to Montréal with his parents about 1647 and became ***the first altar boy in Montréal***, according to **Marguerite Bourgeoys**. His father is known as ***the first habitant of Montréal***, since he received ***the first land grant*** from **Governor Maisonneuve** in 1648. Pierre probably learned the trade of gunsmith from ***Jean Tavernier dit La Forest et La Lochetière*** and may in turn have taught his brother ***Jean-Baptiste Gadois*** the trade.

With marriageable men outnumbering women by six to fourteen in colonial Québec, there was bound to be some competition for brides, and there apparently was competition over Marie. She chose Pierre as her husband over another suitor named **René Besnard dit Bourjoly**, a corporal in the Montréal garrison. Rebuffed, the jilted Besnard swore ***revenge***, proclaiming that the marriage would be childless and vowing to ensure this by ***casting a spell*** over the couple using ***a knotted cord***. Superstition held that if the person casting the spell secretly knotted a cord three times in the presence of the couple during the marriage ceremony, the couple would be sterile unless the cord was un-knotted.

Pierre was *allegedly* told to recite the psalm ***Miserere mei Deus*** backwards in Latin during the wedding Mass to ward off the spell, as was the custom in France at the time. In the church on that day were numerous dignitaries, for not only were Marie and Pierre getting married, but the ceremony would also celebrate the marriage of **Major Lambert Closse** and **Elisabeth Moyen**. **Governor Maisonneuve** was present, as were notary ***Bénigne Basset***, ***Charles Lemoyne***, ***Mathurin Langevin***, ***Sieur de La Croix*** and ***René Besnard dit Bourjoly***—there to celebrate the marriage of his superior officer Lambert Closse and to curse the marriage of his rival Pierre Gadois.

The witchcraft trial of René Besnard dit Bourjoly

When no children were born in the first year of their marriage, the couple was advised to go to Québec City and receive ***a second nuptial blessing*** from **Bishop Laval**. When the bishop's blessing proved ineffective, Besnard was accused of making Pierre sterile. On 2 November 1658, he was tried for ***sorcery*** in the **seigneurial court of Montréal**—and was ***the first trial for witchcraft in Nouveau France***. The proceedings were presided over by **Louis d'Ailleboust, Seigneur de Coulonge**. Faced with the prospect of being ***burned alive for sorcery***, Besnard denied using witchcraft on the couple, but alleged *that* "Marie had promised to sleep with him if he would break the spell" and claiming *that* she suggested this "remedy" to him and not the other way around, as Marie testified. Confronted with testimony that he had boasted of "knowing how to tie the knot and who tied it for her husband."

Besnard claimed *that* he was speaking of **"*lacing a corset*."**

In November 1658, ***fille a marier*** **Françoise Bénard** testified that" Besnard told her *that* he knew of the spell, which he claimed could last 17 years. He also *allegedly* spoke of the spell to ***fille a marier*** **Jeanne Godard**. Besnard admitted speaking with Jeanne, but claimed not to remember what the conversation was about. He *also* testified that he was only joking if he spoke about witchcraft, in an effort to scare Pierre. The court did not believe Besnard's denials and equivocation. He was imprisoned and later banished from Montréal, settling at Trois-Rivières.

Whether Besnard actually cast a spell or not, the damage had been done just the same. After a three-year waiting period imposed by canon law, Marie and Pierre's marriage was annulled by ***Bishop Laval*** on 30 August 1660, "because of permanent impotence caused by an evil spell."

Two weeks after the annulment, on 13 September 1660, ***Governor Maisonneuve*** sentenced Pierre to pay Marie 100 livres on the feast of Saint-Michel (29 September) and another 300 livres on Christmas, as an **"*indemnity*"** for the time that she lived with him, based on a provision in their marriage contract that would give Marie a rent of 60 livres, plus an additional 300 livres in the event that the couple had no children. In 1665, Pierre married ***fille du Roi*** **Jeanne Bénard**, who helped him disprove the stigma of **"*impotence*"** by giving him 14 children.

Less than a month after the annulment, in his Montréal study, on October 8th, notary Basset drew up a marriage contract between **Marie Gadois *née* Pontonnier** (age 18) and **Pierre Martin dit La Rivière**—an ***interpreter*** and ***surgeon***. On 3 November 1660, the two were married at the church of Notre-Dame de Montréal, in a ceremony celebrated by **Père Gabriel Souart**.

Pierre Martin dit La Rivière *son of Jacques Martin and Simone Closteau* was born in the parish of Sainte-Colombe (canton and arrondissement of La Flèche, diocese of Angers), Anjou, He enlisted to go to Canada on 14 April 1653 at La Flèche (notary Lafousse), arriving at Montréal on November 16th with the **Grande Recrue**. Before he left, Pierre acknowledged receiving 75 livres advance wages.

Tragically, only four months after her second marriage, Marie became a widow. **Pierre Martin *dit* La Rivière was killed in an Iroquois ambush** on 24 March 1661. His ***decapitated body*** was found on 22 June 1661 and buried at Montréal six days later. On 9 November 1661, his ***posthumous daughter*** was baptized at Montréal and given the name Marie— *after her mother*.

On 5 December 1661, with Father Souart again performing the ceremony, Marie married **Honoré Langlois *dit* Lachapelle et Croustille** *son of Jean Langlois and Jacquette Charpentier—a* ***hat maker***: (Both spouses signed a marriage contract drawn up on October 16th by notary Basset): (Honoré was born circa 1632 at Paris, France—and he is noted at Montréal as early as 3 July 1659).

Honoré and Marie had ten children, disproving her "impotence" as surely as Pierre Gadois':

Daughter Jeanne was baptized on 16 January 1664 at Montréal.

Honoré was baptized on 30 December 1665 [ ] but buried on 18 February 1666.

Marguerite was baptized at Montréal on 25 February 1667.

Anne-Thérèse (19 September 1669)…

Jean (26 June 1672)…

André (15 April 1675)… and

Françoise was born on November 20th at La Côte Saint-Jean; baptized 27 November 1678 at Montréal).

The family moved to **Pointe-aux-Trembles** on-or-before 1681. Sadly, Marie lost her last three children, all before the age of three:

Antoine (baptized 25 September 1681) died (age 3) and was buried on 30 October 1684.

Joseph (baptized 22 April 1684) died (eight days of age) and was buried on 30 April 1684).
Antoine (baptized 13 June 1685) died (age 3) and was buried on 1 December 1688.

Honoré Langlois *dit* Lachapelle et Croustille was buried on 12 December 1709 at Pointe-aux-Trembles. Nine years later, Marie Pontonnier was *also* buried at Pointe-aux-Trembles on 7 January 1718.

The incident of the alleged spell cast over Marie's marriage to Pierre Gadois had its legacy in the official policies of the Catholic Church in New France. In his ***Ritual of the Diocese of Québec*** (published in 1703), **Bishop Saint-Valuer** included an article that admitted "It sometimes occurs that by a just judgment of God, the married persons are prevented by an evil spell or charm from consummating the marriage."

The afflicted couple was to pray for release from the spell, confess their sins and take communion. If this remedy did not work, they were to seek the assistance of priests, who would determine if Church prayers or an exorcism were necessary. Under no circumstances were they to ask the person who cast the spell to undo it with another or to renounce the first marriage and contract another, "which would cause insult to the Sacrament, and could only come from the Devil"

Séguin, *Sorcellerie*, p. 58.
Perrault, p. 273, quoted from the Archives Judiciaire de Montréal.
Boyer, p. 295, quoted from the Rituel du Diocese de Québec.
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